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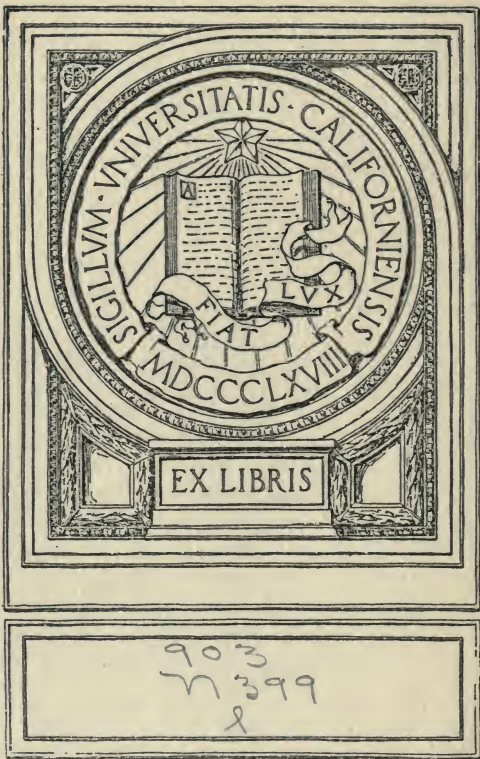


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LAUREATE
ADDRESS

JOHN G. NEIHARDT

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Laureate Address

of John G. Neihardt

Upon Official Notification of His
Choice as Poet Laureate of Nebraska



CHICAGO
THE BOOKFELLOWS
1921

Of this first edition, five hundred copies have been printed in the month of November, 1921.

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The Occasion

On April 18th, 1921, the Senate and House of Representatives of the Nebraska legislature passed a joint and concurrent resolution naming John G. Neihardt Poet Laureate of Nebraska, in recognition of the American Epic Cycle upon which he has been engaged for eight years.

On June 18th, 1921, the official notification ceremony, conducted by representatives of the state government and the State University, was held in the Temple Theatre at Lincoln, Prof. A. A. Reed presiding. Professor Reed, after stating the purpose of the meeting, introduced Dean L. A. Sherman, who represented the University as Acting Chancellor. Dean Sherman said:

We have unique grounds for congratulating ourselves upon the occasion which calls us together on this eighteenth of June, 1921. It is an auspicious date and day for the Commonwealth of Nebraska. No other state, it appears, has, by legislative recognition, a poet laureate. No other state, we may fairly say, has such a reason. Nature has not shaped for us, in this paradise of prairie country, mountains that might become by myth or fancy, the home of gods or muses. There is, there can be, no Olympus, no Parnassus here. But we have that which has given fame to all the sacred groves and mountains and fountains of spiritual history. We have the poet himself in presence with us now.

The ceremonial that we are assembled to witness is by no means a novel one. In the days when Parnassus was, in the youth time of the arts, sons of Apollo were crowned publicly with his laurel. And so at the end of the middle age was Petrarch crowned at the Capitol in Rome. Were our own great new Capitol finished, it would have been fitting that the first Poet Laureate of Nebraska should have been honored at or within its portals. We of the University think ourselves fortunate to offer as its substitute this meeting place. I have pleasure of presenting here the Honorable E. P. Brown, who as the representative of his Excellency, Governor McKelvie, will deliver the address of notification.

Mr. Brown then read from an engrossed copy the resolution of the Legislature:

HOUSE ROLL NO. 467

Introduced by George C. Snow of Dawes County.
TITLE: A Bill for a Joint and Concurrent Resolution declaring John G. Neihardt the poet laureate of Nebraska.

WHEREAS, there is the closest connection between the growth of civilization and the development of literature; and

WHEREAS, wise commonwealths, in all ages, have recognized this relation by lifting the poet to the same plane as the statesman and military chieftain; and

WHEREAS, John G. Neihardt, a citizen of Nebraska, has written a national epic wherein he has developed the mood of courage with which our pioneers explored and subdued our plains, and thus has inspired in Americans that love of the land and its heroes whereby great national traditions are built and perpetuated; and

WHEREAS, our people wish to exalt such gifts of the human spirit; therefore be it

RESOLVED AND ENACTED, by the House of Representatives, the Senate concurring, that John G. Neihardt be, and hereby is, declared poet laureate of Nebraska.

WALTER L. ANDERSON,
Speaker of the House.

F. P. CORRICK,
Chief Clerk of the House.

PELHAM A. BARROWS,
President of the Senate.

CLYDE H. BARNARD,
Secretary of the Senate.

Approved April 21, 1921, 12:30 o'clock P. M.

SAMUEL R. MCKELVIE,
Governor.

Mr. Reed, then addressing Mr. Neihardt, spoke as follows:

We are met formally to complete the action of the representatives of the people of the State in designating you Poet Laureate of Nebraska, an action based upon their recognition of the eminence you have obtained in your art. To this end I am clothed with the full authority of the Governor and bear his commands to tender you, as I now do, formal and official notice of your appointment, and also to offer you assurance that the action carries with it from the people of your State their respect, their admiration and their love.

Thereupon Mr. Neihardt, after expressing appreciation of the honor, delivered the following address:

The Address

LAUREATE ADDRESS

I want to talk to you about the technique of Poetry and the relation of that art to education and the social process in general. In order that you may be able to judge as to the relevance of my remarks, I must first tell you what I understand by the word "education."

Were the definition, that I hold, my own, I would not presume to offer it here; but I need only find the proper words with which to express the common opinion of many seers in many times and countries; and this, unfortunately, seems now to be necessary, for we have been living in one of the most materialistic ages that have ever been known, and of the many ideals that have suffered, that of education has not suffered least.

I would say that education is fundamentally a spiritual process. In its proper function it is concerned less with the problem of acquiring the means of life than with the far more difficult one of knowing what to do with life after one is in possession of the means to live. We have heard much of practical education; and there is no fault to find with the expression; for "practical" means that which will work, and surely only that which will work may be regard-

ed as good. But there has been something radically wrong with our understanding of the word "practical." Owing to the tremendous economic pressure of our individualistic social system, we have been forced to interpret the word as meaning that which contributes directly to material success; and for a great many people practical education has come to signify that mental training which is calculated to give the maximum of income in the minimum of time.

Obviously, if that conception be a true one, a human being is little more than a machine designed for the purpose of diverting to his own uses as great a portion of the world's stream of wealth as may be possible under the circumstances. Thus, the emphasis of life is placed upon a purely material scale of values—which is the scale of the brute. That conception of education results in the classification of men and women by what they *possess* rather than by what they *are*; and it is a matter of common knowledge that, in the anarchic scramble for possession of material things, it is not infrequently the admittedly lower type of man that arouses the envy of the neighborhood. In that scramble of the acquisitive instincts, to cherish the higher values as evolved through ages of race experience, is to insure defeat. In that scramble, conscience and human sympathy and all the priceless imponderabilia of the soul become as a mill-stone hung about the neck of him who holds them dear. Furthermore, however much a man, as viewed by the envious eyes of his neighbors, may gain in apparent worth by the possession of

material things, it remains true that not one jot is added to the real stature of the man by virtue of that possession; for a man can be no other than that which he truly *is*, as distinguished from what he *has*. And it is with what a man *is* — that is to say, with personality — that education must be chiefly concerned. It is the process of making a man rich in the only values that can not be acquired by accident, or theft in any of its many disguises, and that can not be lost by such means. And in what do these values consist? In that complex of spiritual and mental attitudes that have resulted from man's age-long struggle. And in this sense, it is the prime function of education to make men social beings; to make them, insofar as may be possible, citizens of all time and of all countries; to give them the widest possible comprehension of a man's relation to other men and to his physical environment; to substitute sympathy for prejudice in the list of human motives. In other words, the consciousness of the individual must be extended to include the race consciousness. It must be made possible for the one to live vicariously the life of the many from the beginning.

It will be said by some that this is a large order, indeed; but it must be remembered that education is not an end, but rather an endless process, a manner of becoming, a spiritual direction. The fundamental importance of World Literature in this connection ought to be obvious. Institutions of learning are devices for facilitating the educational process; but insofar as they neglect World Literature, they fall short

of their purpose; for what is World Literature but a record of the continuous consciousness of the race? And what is Science but a running commentary on that tremendous text?

It may be remarked by some that this is old fashioned Humanism, impractical in the modern world. It is not Humanism that is impractical, but rather the debased ideals of our materialistic society; for what is it that all men seek if it be not happiness? And what is happiness but the spiritual result of harmonious adjustment to the world of men and things? And can one logically hope to achieve that state through a material process? A thousand seers have agreed that happiness does not come from without; that it is not something to be pursued and captured; that possession of things can not produce it; that the desire to possess is like a flame growing upon the fuel that feeds it, or like one's own shadow that one pursues in vain. A certain amount of material goods is necessary to existence; but the needed amount is not great, and what could be less wise than to spend one's life in acquiring the means of life, and neglecting to live?

It is especially fitting that this view of Education should be emphasized at this time when the word "Democracy" is in every mouth. Though Democracy is fundamentally an economic concept, concerned with the nice adjustment of individual rights and duties that all may contribute to, and justly share, the means of life; yet its ultimate purpose transcends the grosser world and emphasizes the equality of opportunity in the spiritual realm as well. The so-

called "practical" education is too much concerned with the economic world, too little with the more important business of the soul. As it is generally understood today, practical education is essentially a process calculated to make efficient serfs for a Bourgeois social system that now seems doomed to pass away, as the result of its culminating catastrophe in August, 1914. The education of the future should not make us less efficient in the economic realm; but it should certainly make it possible for all to share that priceless racial inheritance, which, as I have been saying, is the very essence of genuine education.

Now let us proceed to the discussion of Poetry.

In this scientific age men justly demand that nothing shall survive without some utilitarian justification. If it could be shown that poetry performs no important function in the social process, I should be among the first to insist that the writing of it be interdicted and that poets be set to useful tasks. Happily, however, poetry does not suffer under the pragmatic test, as I hope to show.

You will agree with me in defining Language as a means for communicating states of consciousness. Now if all states of consciousness were capable of communication by direct factual statement, then the study of Language would indeed be no more than the study of words arranged according to the rules of Grammar and Syntax. But you have all noted that in the higher realms of human utterance, certain effects are obtained that can not be explained satisfactorily by the most industrious parsing and analysis.

Something subtle and powerful somehow escapes between your nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions. Something is present in the greater moments of human utterance that quite eludes your finest mesh of case, number, tense, mode. At such moments, you become aware that it is a mere skeleton you have been analyzing, and that some mysterious spirit lives among those dry bones. At such moments it is apparent that one might as well hope to explain the *Æneid* by analyzing the food that Virgil ate, as to account, by means of mere verbal mechanics, for the miracle that has happened among your words.

And what is this miracle that Grammar and Syntax can not explain? It is the universal language, "the language of all the world," as Professor Woodberry has called it, bearing something like the same relation to the language of words that perfume bears to the rose. It operates in modern English or French or German or Spanish or Italian in accordance with the same laws that governed it in the ancient Sanskrit or Greek. However the historical tongues may develop, merge into new tongues and cease to be, that one mode of human utterance remains; for it is based upon no mutable convention in time, upon no chance of racial triumph or defeat, and is unconcerned with geographical boundary lines. It is firmly grounded in fundamental human nature, and the devices through which it functions are characteristic of, and attain their highest potency in, poetry.

It has been remarked that "we are all islands

shouting lies to each other across seas of misunderstanding." Stripped of its obvious hyperbole, the statement will be found to contain an important truth. From the first conscious attempt to convey an urgent meaning by means of onomatopoeic grunts, to the latest literary masterpiece, language has been an inadequate means of communication;¹ for always as language developed, the psychic complexes that constitute consciousness became more subtle and increasingly difficult to express. Thought outruns utterance for the apparent reason that while language has developed under the pressure of fundamental human need, the restless, dreaming soul of man has always groped for values unrelated to physical necessity. As Bergson would say, the basic structure of language is utilitarian. Evidence of this is to be found in the fact that the nose, a sense organ relatively unimportant in mankind's struggle for survival, has no vocabulary of its own; while the eye, the ear and the mouth, being of tremendous importance in the struggle to survive, are richly endowed with words.

Now, so long as men communicate only such ideas as are more or less directly concerned with fundamental human needs; so long as men are satisfied to discuss only certain phases of concrete reality, no confusion ensues. Those words, and their combinations, that are concerned immediately with the two great facts of human life — food and propagation — admit of no misunderstanding. But man is master of the earth solely because he is gifted with the power

¹ See F. W. H. Myers' essay on Virgil.

to dream constructively, transcending his physical environment; and, accordingly, the dictionaries of the world record numerous attempts, only partially successful, to express in sound the discoveries that have resulted from this high adventuring of the human soul. But it is known that limitation may be in itself a means to power; and out of the very inadequacy of language has grown its supreme mode of expression — which is Poetry. That Poetry is indeed the supreme form of human expression is amply evidenced by the fact that in every age and country the racial consciousness has been most fully realized through the poet's art. Consider the Mahabharata, Job, the Shah Nameh, the Homeric poems, the Athenian dramas, the Æneid, The Divine Comedy, Faust, the Plays of Shakespeare! In passing it may be interesting to note how the theories of relativity and four-dimensional space seem to support the contention that poetry is the supreme art. Music, it may be said, exists in one dimension, Time; Painting in two dimensions with the illusion of a third; Sculpture, in three; while Poetry not only exists in a three dimensional world, but *moves in it*, thus adding a fourth dimension, Time.

Now Poetry, in its technical aspect, may be defined as a device for communicating human experiences that, owing to their super-utilitarian character, can not be definitely expressed by the mere juxtaposition of words in accordance with the mechanics of any given tongue. Poetry, in its highest moments, is an emotional approximation of the inexpressible; a means

whereby men may share with each other the ancient but never old news of an immaterial world that interpenetrates and glorifies the world of sense. The essence of prose is direct, factual statement. The essence of Poetry is suggestion. In its characteristic function, Poetry *tells* nothing; rather it *induces* the mood of understanding by four principal means, which are as follows:

1. By the use of symbols.
2. By rhythm, with or without rhyme.
3. By the studied manipulation of sound.
4. By appeal to memory.

I will give brief consideration to each of these in order as stated.

First, the use of symbols. You have all noted in reading poetry of the higher order that commonplace words are frequently used in a special sense for which no authority can be found in any dictionary. If you will strike any note on a piano, and place your ear close to the strings, you will hear a higher, thinner note growing out of the one you struck — a haunting ghost of a sound. That overtone may be likened to the sublimated meaning of a symbolic word. As an illustration, let us consider the words “rose” and “lily,” both of which have been used so often in this heightened sense that they have become hackneyed.¹ Fancy that in your reading you come upon the following line:

“The roses and riots of passion, the lilies and
 languors of sin.”

¹ See Woodberry's essay, “The Language of All the World.”

We will suppose that you are an extremely factual minded person, and that your consciousness has not yet been expanded to include universal race experience. Being such a person, you are naturally a bit puzzled at this apparently unwarranted association of such words as "rose" and "passion," "lily" and "sin." However, you are conscientious, as factual minded people are likely to be, and so you consult the dictionary. You turn to "rose," and you find the following: "A shrub of the genus *Rosa*, or its flower, found wild in numerous species and cultivated from remote antiquity." This definition in no way lessens your difficulty; and you read on down the column, learning much about many kinds of roses; but at the end, the poet's use of the word is quite as puzzling as ever. You extend your curiosity to the word "lily"—with a similar result. Evidently the lexicographer has withheld something of importance about these words! And what is it that he has withheld? Nothing less than the distilled essence of universal human experience in the twin mysteries of love and death; and that experience can not be handed to you by any lexicographer, however exhaustive his definitions may be.

But if, on the other hand, you are one who has lived spiritually with the great ones of this world, and through them have made the race consciousness your own, you will not turn to the dictionary upon reading that seductive line. You will pause a moment to ponder; and in that moment something wonderful will happen to you; for a multitude of race

memories, more or less vague perhaps, but none the less compelling, will flash across your mind. The sublimated joy and grief of unnumbered lovers will grip you in that moment, and you will be enriched with the age-old cleansing regret for many who were very dear and are dead. For those two little words, by long association, have become symbols of two great dominating mysteries of life.

There is a line of William Morris that combines the rose with another symbol of universal human significance, the moon. It has always had a powerful effect upon me though it is extremely simple. It runs as follows:

“Two red roses across the moon.”

Now I believe that I am not a whit more sentimental in temperament than the most matter-of-fact individual before me. On the contrary, my closest friends say that I am anything but a sentimentalist. I live close to the ground, and it is my habit to insist upon the importance of the sense of common things. But whenever that line occurs to me, I have a moment of enchantment. *Roses and the moon!* Whoever has been young will be sure to get something of a thrill from that combination of words—a thrill in no way to be explained by floriculture on the one hand and astronomy on the other! But he who has been young with the youth of all the world shall have the better understanding and the greater thrill.

I do not wish to leave the impression that I am particularly interested in the symbols of erotic exper-

ience. I have chosen these examples merely because they are hackneyed, and therefore obvious. One might go on for days analyzing symbols of equal power, relating to every phase of human experience. There are thousands of such words that have been charged with the joys and sorrows of the race by a hundred generations of song. Each is like a little door opened suddenly upon long vistas of life; and he who looks through them shall be glorified by the consciousness of his close kinship with all men in all times. And in every case it will be found that we are indebted to the sorcery of the poets for these enchanted words. One can not know any language well unless he become familiar with its verbal overtones; and, therefore, to neglect the study of Poetry is equivalent to limiting the range of communicable states of consciousness and to make impossible a full realization of the very purpose of language.

The second in our list of devices through which Poetry functions as the economy of expression, is rhythm. Everyone must have noted that, whether we are concerned with forms in time or forms in space, symmetry is the prime requisite of survival. Symmetry may be defined roughly as the balance of all parts with reference to the center of the whole. In accordance with some inscrutable law, all things, in the universal struggle to survive, display a tendency to become round. The circle is undoubtedly the absolute. A regularly curved line, returning upon itself, is the circle in space; periodicity is the circle in time. The former is manifest in the representative

arts and in the objective world generally; the latter is dominant in the arts of music and poetry and in the subjective realm. That which is not symmetrical is not thoroughly efficient and cannot endure. In accordance with cosmic law, a tentative form must approximate roundness or it ceases to exist as a thing in itself and becomes a part of some symmetrical scheme that absorbs it. This idea may be extended into all fields. It is true in mechanics, morals, statecraft, art. You cannot overwork the conception. The creative force of the universe seems to move most efficiently in a curve that tends towards a "perfect return" upon itself. We have been hearing a great deal about "free form verse" of late years; but there can be no such thing as free form in the sense intended. Form can not be conceived as free, simply because it is not essentially arbitrary, but is determined in accordance with inexorable law — the same that determines the course of the sun, the roundness of the celestial bodies, the beating of the heart, the ebb and flow of the tide. It was not through whim or chance that poets first chanted in rhythm. Rhythm in poetry is not an artificial device, but a natural phenomenon. It is no less than the artistic manifestation of power's tendency to return upon itself, to make cycles.

All power is rhythmic. All effective machinery acts in rhythm. An engine is losing power the moment it ceases to act rhythmically. At that moment when human utterance reaches the height of expressiveness, it begins to swing into measure. An Indian squaw in the grip of a great passion sways her body

back and forth, and her voice becomes rhythmic. The efficiency of an army is increased by the drum-beat. A large body of soldiers, marching over a long bridge, must break into rout step, lest the structure be endangered by rhythm.

Poetry is the economy of human expression. It was first expressed rhythmically because in order to achieve the utmost economy — in order to be poetry — it was obliged to be symmetrical in the time sense, just as great representative art must be rhythmic in the space sense.

Rhyme is not, of course, an essential; but, when skilfully used, it is of very great value in the economy of poetry; for it serves to emphasize the law of periodicity, and is a legitimate means of heightening poetic effect. Perhaps its greatest value to the craftsman, who by virtue of a long and patient apprenticeship has become master of his tools, is to be found in the increased difficulty of composition it entails. For it forces the poet to give the utmost attention to every syllable in his line and compels him to examine every possible synonym in the language that he may find the one word exactly suited to the purpose of the moment. I have often found occasion to compare the works of various modern poets of high rank, with this idea in mind; and I have found that in poetical works of considerable length, those that are unrhymed are more often diffuse than those that are rhymed; that, as a rule, more is actually told in a dozen rhymed lines than in the same number of lines without rhyme.

It is the fashion of the moment among a certain

class of would-be poets, seeking a short and easy trail up the Parnassian steep, to speak of rhyme and definite rhythmic pattern as trammels. Doubtless both are such to the unskilled, and quite properly so. But to a craftsman who has spent, let us say, a quarter of a century in struggling to master them, rhythmic pattern and rhyme are the very sources of artistic freedom; for genuine freedom can not exist except within the confines of inescapable law. Doubtless the pacing horse, when he first goes into training, is impatient with his hobbles, feeling that he could travel better if he were only allowed to gallop. But when he has mastered the technique of pacing, his hobbles no longer hinder him. He finds himself freer and his efficiency greater by virtue of his very limitations. So it is with the skilled craftsman in verse.

But we have not yet touched upon the chief value of rhythm in the dynamics of poetry. We have noted that it is the prime function of this subtler phase of language to induce a mood of understanding rather than to tell by direct factual statement. That is to say, the characteristic appeal of poetry is to the subconscious mind. Every student knows that at those moments when the intellectual process is at its height, the normal consciousness is subdued, the objective world fades away, and the sense of time is lost. Under such circumstances I have known an hour to pass in what seemed to be an instant. Whenever the mind works at its maximum intensity, this phenomenon is likely to occur; and it is out of just such mental states, apparently divorced from time and space, that

all the beauty and wonder of the man-made world have come. In considering the lapse of normal consciousness during periods of intense concentration, one comes very near to the definition of genius, which F. W. H. Myers believed to be a predisposition to subliminal uprushes.

Now since it is the function of poetry to release the potentialities of the subconscious mind, it is apparent that any device calculated to subdue the normal consciousness must be of extreme importance in the poetic process; and it is well known that rhythm has a powerful hypnotic effect. All mothers in all times and countries have instinctively understood this.

The third in our list of poetic devices is the manipulation of sound. Often in well wrought poems it will be noted that the rhythm, which is determined by syllabic quantities in the classic tongues and by accent in most modern languages, is not the only one. There are subtler rhythms, not concerned with the rules of scansion, and these proceed concurrently with the primary rhythm somewhat after the manner of melodies in counterpoint. One of these secondary rhythms is realized by a skillful shifting of the cæsura so as to give, within the regular beat, a sense of steadily increasing wave lengths of sound, culminating in a tonal climax and falling back to begin anew. The effect upon an ear made sensitive by long acquaintance with poetry is like that of a nightwind about the eaves or of the accumulating force of waves upon a beach. It is probable that most readers of poetry, though they may be more or less moved by this ghostly

rhythm, are quite unconscious of the means employed by the poet to produce the effect. Tennyson's blank verse, especially in *The Idylls*, admirably illustrates the value of this secondary rhythm; while the rhymed couplets of Dryden and Pope demonstrate the wearisome monotony that inevitably results from the lack of it.

There is still another minor rhythm which is determined by the designed recurrence of vowel and consonant sounds within the line. This is so subtle that it hardly admits of discussion here, and is better left to the sense of the individual reader, though it is none the less real and none the less important because of its subtlety. It is possible, however, to give direction to the curiosity of the student unfamiliar with the subtleties of verse construction by stating that Browning generally lacked the sense for this nice adjustment of sound in varying tonal patterns, while Swinburne had it in the highest degree, for which reason, largely, his verse is the most musical and seductive in our language. This studied arrangement of vowels and consonants into what one might term a sound mosaic is valuable not only for the ease with which poetry so written may be voiced, but also because it furnishes a tonal background for those occasional discords which the poet must use by way of shocking the normal consciousness awake to some momentary phase of ruder actuality in the subject matter. This latter phase of poetic strategy properly falls under the head of onomatopoeia.

Almost any eighth grade pupil is able to give the

stock example of onomatopoeia, which is Poe's "Bells" — an altogether wretched example, vying in blatant obviousness with Southey's verbose dissertation on the disorderly conduct of the waters at Lodore. Perhaps my deep-seated dislike for the "Bells" may be traced to a teacher of expression I once had; for I have not forgotten the burning sense of shame I experienced at those times when I was forced to take the floor, labor at an imaginary bell rope and chortle that inane combination of monotonous sounds amidst gales of laughter from the class. I have called it a wretched example of onomatopoeia for the reason that the device, which may be of great service in the economy of poetry when employed with subtlety and for a definite purpose, is here used by Poe for the sake of the sound merely, and does not serve to communicate either an idea or a mood. Nothing of importance is accomplished by contriving to combine in a metrical composition a considerable number of words that happen to rhyme with "bell." In "Ulalume," however, Poe was wonderfully successful in inducing a distinct mood by means of appropriate sounds.

Some of the finest examples of onomatopoeia that I know are to be found in the Greek poets, and the most notable of these are, strangely enough, passed without comment in all of the texts with which I am acquainted. You who have read the *Agamemnon* of *Æschylus* will recall the first speech of the "King of Men" upon his return to his native Argos after the fall of Ilium. He describes in a few swift phrases the destruction of the Trojan city, and in his descrip-

tion these lines occur. I will give them first in very inadequate English :

“Rave Ruin’s whirlwinds; and the ashes, dying with them,
Belch forth fat blasts of wealth.”

You will note that the poet is concerned for the moment with the puffing and spurting of the tongues of flame from the ruins of a great conflagration. Now observe the manner in which the greatest poet of them all — save only one — has suited the sound to the sense. In the original the words run thus :

“*Spodos propempei pionas ploutou pnoas.*”

There is a line in the “*Ædipus Tyrannus*” of Sophocles that is quite as remarkable for onomatopoeic effect. It occurs in the Messenger’s speech descriptive of the suicide of Jocasta. Many of you will remember that a portion of that speech is concerned with incest, unwittingly committed by the unhappy Queen. Gilbert Murray’s version runs as follows :

“But we heard
Her voice within, crying to him of old,
Her Laius long dead; and things untold
Of the old kiss unforgotten, that should bring
The lover’s death and leave the loved a thing
Of horror, yea a field beneath the plow
For sire and son; then wailing bitter low
Across the bed of deaths unreconciled,
Husband from husband born, and child from child—”

It is the last line that is onomatopoeic in the original — a line concerned with a mood of horror and disgust. Now what sound in nature is more likely to convey such a mood than the sound of a frog's croaking? It is that which Sophocles used for the production of the desired effect. And here is the line in Greek:

“Ex andros andra kai tekn’ ’ek teknon tekoi.”

Another striking example from the ancient Greek is to be found in one of the Sapphic fragments. It is descriptive of the moaning of cool waters through an apple orchard on a sleep day. Note the reiteration of the moaning sound:

“Amphi de psuchron keladei di’ usdon
Malinon aithussomenon de phullon
Koma katarei.”

A similar example, producing the sound of wind, is to be found in Book II, line 441, of the Georgics.

There are many good examples in English; as, for instance, in that portion of Tennyson's “Passing of Arthur,” where Bedivere bears the dying king to the barge. There one hears the clash of the knight's harness and “the dint of arméd heels” down “the last hard footsteps of that iron crag.” Perhaps the most remarkable effect in the passage cited is the sudden shifting from consonant to vowel sounds when Bedivere first sees “the level lake and the long glories of the winter moon.”

In a recent poem, descriptive of a prairie rain storm,

we find the sound of distant thunder mumbling in the sweltering hush, as follows:

“What mean yon cries where the flat world dies
In hazy rotundity —
Tumult a-swoon, silence a-croon,
Lapped in profundity —
Bane or boon or only the drone of a fever rune?”

But onomatopoeia is concerned not only with the imitation of sound; it is also capable of intensifying the hearer's sense of motion. In the fifth *Æneid*, line 481, we find perhaps the most famous example of the device employed to this end. The line to which I refer describes the felling of an ox with a blow, and by shortening the quantity of the proper syllable Vergil succeeded in giving a vivid sense of the falling weight. One of our modern poets has suggested the hoof beats of galloping horses in the movement of a line, which runs thus:

“The might of the Mede, the hate of the Hun,
the bleak Northwind of the Goth.”

I have often heard students of poetry speak of “poetic ornament”; and doubtless many regard onomatopoeia as chiefly ornamental. But it must be understood that poetry is not fancy-work, primarily designed to please. It is a mode of human utterance existing for the sole purpose of communicating states of consciousness beyond the power of factual statement to express. Ornament for its own sake has no place in poetry. Only those devices may be regarded as

legitimate which serve to increase the hearer's receptivity. In the language of poetry adequacy alone is beauty. I am aware that this statement smacks of literary heresy; but a close examination of its ultimate meaning will reveal its truth.

The fourth principal means in the economy of poetry is the appeal to memory, and it is by far the most important of them all, because it has to do with the very subject-matter of the art. There are two kinds of memory — that of the individual and that of the race. That poetry which appeals to the individual solely through his recollection of his personal reactions to the narrow environment of everyday life, is minor poetry; while that which appeals to both the individual memory and to that all-embracing race-memory — historical and literary tradition — is major poetry. It follows that the power which poetry will exert upon a given individual will be in direct proportion to his ability to respond to the memory appeal. This explains the popular success of such poets as Riley, and also the general neglect of the great world-poets whom everyone will praise and few will read. The average person is fairly rich in individual memories, but poor in race memory — thanks to an educational system that emphasizes the so-called “practical.”

For the manner in which the memory appeal functions in poetry, we have a close analogy in the wireless telegraph. When, for instance, the faint electric thrill has traveled across the Atlantic, say from Ireland to Newfoundland, it is too weak to operate the

recording instrument at the receiving station. For this reason, in the early days of the wireless, a device called "a coherer" was employed. It consisted of a glass tube filled with iron filings. Through this the faint electric thrill passed, and as it did so, caused the filings to cohere, thus completing the circuit between the recording instrument and a powerful ground battery. It was the ground battery that did the work. In the dynamics of poetry, to apply the analogy, the written or spoken word is the coherer that conducts the poetic suggestion, and serves to hurl across the mind of the hearer the latent, and often unsuspected, power with which his soul is charged. It is the soul of the recipient that must complete the work of wonder; and thus precious messages are passed from consciousness to consciousness across the "seas of misunderstanding."

I have given a necessarily brief outline of the dynamics of poetry; but before I close it seems necessary that I should give some consideration to the poetry of our time. There is every reason for believing that we have entered upon one of the most notable poetic periods since the Revival of Learning reached its supreme flowering in Elizabethan England. Most of you here will remember how, a decade ago, poets were generally regarded with suspicion if not with actual hostility. We were nothing if not "practical," and we were well convinced that the business of being a poet was hardly a man-sized job. We were hustlers, and we had no time for nonsense. Also, we had no time to stop and ask ourselves just what all the

hustle was about, and where we thought we were going, and why we were in such mad haste to get there, and what we intended to do when we reached our destination. In order to explain the curious obsession under which we then labored, it is necessary to go back to the French Revolution.

That great social upheaval was essentially a Bourgeois revolt, and it resulted in the ascendancy of the trading class throughout the Western World. The actual status of the Proletariat was but little altered. It was not the triumph of Democracy, as many still think, but of Individualism, which is the direct opposite of Democracy; for Individualism places the social emphasis upon the rights of the individual, while Democracy, if it is ever to be realized, must stress the duties of the individual that the rights of the group and the individual may be conserved. The former leads naturally to the conception of liberty as license; the latter, to the conception of liberty as law.

For awhile the new social order, based upon the *laissez faire* theory of economics, worked well, for it offered an enormous stimulus to personal initiative. As a result, if we are to regard progress as chiefly a material process, the world leaped forward farther in four generations than it had crept in all the centuries since the fall of the Roman Empire. But very soon it began to be evident, not only to the seers who sit above the crowd, but even to the many who labored much and had little time to think, that something was fundamentally wrong with this new social order in which the individual might freely seek his own

selfish ends without regard for the general welfare of society, so long as he paid his taxes and kept within the bounds of certain statutes that were virtually little more than police regulations designed to keep some semblance of order in the universal scramble for the things of this world. Men began to see how poverty increased among the many, how huge fortunes accumulated with the few, and how the souls of men were being warped and stunted at both extremes of the social scale; for too much is quite as deadly as too little. Out of this state of affairs there grew up a cynical philosophy of life, based upon a purely material scale of values. With the doctrine of the Nazarene upon their lips, men acted upon the principle that "he may take who has the power, and he may keep who can."

Nor were men to be condemned for espousing this philosophy; for what we believe to be true is determined almost wholly by the social atmosphere in which we live. The individual conscience is only rarely able to rise above the prevailing social conscience of the time.

Panics, strikes, inter-class hatred — these in every nation of the Western World were the early and sinister fruits of this philosophy of self-seeking. Had it been possible to confine the operation of that materialistic view of life to the struggle between individuals, the pot of social discord might have simmered on for generations. But it could not long remain so. Powerful predatory groups grew up in every land and to a greater or less extent controlled

the governments of the nations. Between these groups a pitiless struggle for the domination of the economic system of the world inevitably followed. Owing to her geographic situation, her peculiar genius for organization and her highly developed technical skill, quite as much as to her temperamental bias, Germany first forced to its logical conclusion that impossible philosophy of life; and she became the outlaw of the nations, the huge mad dog of the world.

Though many of us may not have known it at the time, what we beheld in August, 1914, was a tremendous demonstration of an ethical fallacy that, much as we might feel disinclined to confess it, had come to be almost universally accepted as true. It was the fallacy involved in the statement that "he may take who has the power, and he may keep who can." So long as it remained in the realm of individual struggle for the means of life, we could not all see it for the hideous thing it always was. But when, greatly magnified, it was suddenly projected upon the map of a continent as upon a vast canvas; when we saw its ultimate meaning scrawled large in the smoke and flame of countless homes; heard it voiced in the hoarse roar of looting millions, in the cries of dying thousands, and in the wailing of whole peoples over their multitudinous dead, then at last many of us began to understand. What the slow, pitiless years of Man's inhumanity to Man could not teach us, the great catastrophe taught. After all these centuries of lip service we begin to see at last how he who taught that a man must be his brother's keeper and that one must

love one's neighbor as oneself, was no impractical dreamer mouthing pretty sentiments for Sunday repetition, but an intensely practical thinker pronouncing the fundamental law of all sane human relations.

It may seem to many of you, at this point, that I have wandered far from my theme, but, as a matter of fact, I have not left it for a moment; for Poetry, being a means of communication in the higher realms of human consciousness, is a social phenomenon, and its status and trend are socially determined.

My aim has been to give as briefly as possible the etiology of that materialistic malady which had fastened upon society before the war, and which had resulted in a conspicuous general neglect of the higher values. Now, while future historians will, no doubt, point to August, 1914, as the division point between the two world-conceptions of organization — Individualism, with its materialistic bias, and Democracy, with its distinct spiritual emphasis — yet no great social change is ever so abruptly realized. The capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453 is generally given as the opening date of the Renaissance, but the new spirit had been abroad in the world some years before that event. Similarly, the reaction against economic individualism and its corollary, materialism, had been felt long before the catastrophe of an impossible social system appalled the world in 1914. The rapid growth of Socialism and Syndicalism were symptoms of that reaction. Science, that had begun by denying whatever could not be weighed and measured, had actually undertaken to prove by

experiment the survival of the ego after the dissolution of the body, and had gone far in that direction. The world had become uneasy as a hive of bees about to swarm; and suddenly all over the world poets sprang up literally by hundreds, and volumes of poetry began to sell as only sensational novels had sold before. This was one of the most profoundly significant symptoms of the social change that was rapidly preparing in the world. Once more men had found materialism intolerable; once more the world had come vaguely to realize the ancient truth that Man can not live by bread alone. It was as though a spiritual springtime had come upon a world grown weary of a long winter. Everywhere there were singing voices. Some few were the voices of nightingales; most were the voices of mocking birds; and very many, it must be said, were no more than the tuneless voices of crows. But when even crows attempt to sing, then summer must indeed be on the way!

Now while it can no longer be doubted that we have entered upon a great poetic period, it can not yet be said that the poetic consciousness of the time has been wholly freed from the baneful influence of the age that is passing; for, as I have remarked, the status and trend of poetry are socially determined, and society is still in the penumbral region of transition from Individualism to Democracy. Accordingly, we have long been, and still are, confronted with the phenomenon of impressionism in nearly every field of intellectual and spiritual endeavor.

At the risk of taking more time than has been allotted to me, I must give some consideration to this significant phase of the contemporary trend, for I believe it is generally misinterpreted.

Impressionism has been defined as the tendency to repudiate all standards of judgment (which are the result of the accumulated experience of the race) and to set up individual caprice as a guide.¹ It is simply the intellectual and spiritual reflex of economic individualism. It is anarchy in the realm of mind, just as the *laissez faire* theory of economics is anarchy in the realm of matter. We find this spirit at work in contemporary art, philosophy, poetry, criticism, morals and religion. It has been misunderstood and highly praised in the intuitional philosophy of Bergson and in the insanities of the more blatant writers of free verse. Some six or seven years ago, an exhibition of Cubist and Futurist paintings was held in various large cities of the country. Many of us went to satisfy our curiosity and some of us remained to laugh. But it was no laughing matter; for out of those grotesque daubs already leered the hideous spirit of disorganization that was even then driving us on to an unthinkable catastrophe. The same spirit was then, and is still, at work in the so-called poetry of a dozen fantastic schools.

It has been the claim of these misguided enthusiasts and poseurs that they are writing democratic

¹ Irving Babbitt. *Modern French Masters of Criticism*. It seems to the writer that Prof. Babbitt, in common with a great many others, confuses Individualism and Democracy.

poetry; whereas, their product is so exclusively aristocratic, as someone has aptly remarked, that in the majority of cases no one but the authors can tell with any degree of certainty just what it is the authors are trying to communicate. Such so-called poetry may be considered democratic only in the very special sense that nearly everybody seems to be writing it; nor is this a matter for marvel, for if each individual is to set up his own standards of judgment, a long and faithful apprenticeship is no longer necessary, and anyone may produce his own poetry for home consumption. For my part, I am quite willing that this should be done; with the proviso, however, that the product shall be consumed at home!

As a reaction against a barren formalism, the "new" poetry, as it is called, will no doubt serve a good purpose in the end; for experimentation is always necessary in a universe where rigidity is death. But formlessness can not survive; and already the inevitable reaction seems to be setting in. Thanks to the abnormal pressure of war-conditions, we have been driving in the general direction of Democracy (though we are still very far from it) — a form of social organization never as yet realized upon this planet. Contrary to the opinions of many, Democracy connotes no free-and-easy mode of life, but intensive organization, the universal reign of law in the interest of the race as a whole. As we near the realization of that supreme social concept, our whole view of life and, consequently, of art, will be correspondingly modified. We shall come to insist more

and more upon experts in all things. Respect for standards, love of order, will return. The petty personalism, that has long dominated us, will die away. Our poets will achieve the objective view of the world of men and things — and it is out of that view that all great art, as all great life, must grow.



To You
Adventures

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